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THE ICELANDIC BOOK PUBLISHING BUSINESS

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RESEARCH

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Abstract

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THE ICELANDIC BOOK PUBLISHING BUSINESS

PROBLEM

To analyze the book publishing and distribution business in Iceland with special reference to:

1. Types of books, number of copies published and production costs.
2. Number of books of the various types sold, retail prices and methods of distribution.
3. Criteria used by Icelandic firms in selecting works in foreign languages for translation and publication in Iceland.
4. Considerations to be taken into account in determining whether foreign books should be translated into Icelandic or distributed in the original language.

SCOPE AND LIMITATIONS

US Government reporting has not emphasized this aspect of Icelandic life, and no books or finished studies devoted to the subject are available. Such materials as are available give only a partial delineation of the book publishing and distribution business in Iceland.

Information existing in Washington on types of books published in Iceland is outdated; the last complete breakdown available was based on 1948 production figures.

Information on numbers of copies issued and sold, methods of distribution, costs of production and prices is extremely scant and at best fragmentary.

No information on the criteria for the selection and publication of Icelandic editions of foreign language books is available. All that may be said on these two points consequently must be speculative.

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THE ICELANDIC BOOK PUBLISHING BUSINESS

SUMMARY

The book publishing and distribution business is a popular profession in Iceland. In this country of about 150,000 inhabitants there are at least 25 commercial publishing houses, an equal number of printing firms and about 65 bookstores. The number of publishing firms and bookstores as compared to the number of inhabitants is thus disproportionately high: 1 publishing house to 6,000 inhabitants and 1 bookstore to 2,500. (The ratios in the United States in 1952 were 1 publishing house to about 200,000 persons and 1 bookstore to 8,000; in France in 1951, 1 publisher to 55,500 and 1 bookstore to 6,000.)

This factor, added to the high production costs and relatively low retail prices, tends to make the profession a less than lucrative one. In spite of this, a relatively large number of new books and translations have yearly made their appearance on the Icelandic book market, although this number has decreased in recent years (1948: 595 new books and translations; 1952: about 140).

According to the latest available breakdown (1948), books of fiction and juvenile literature compose the largest category published and translated, followed by works relating to the social sciences, geography and history.

Danish is the foreign language most often read and imported books come mainly from Denmark, except for fiction, which comes mostly from the US and Great Britain.

The profit motive undoubtedly plays an important role in the selection of books for translation and publication, but it is likely that Communist publishers, with their ready-made clientele of Communist Party members and fellow-travellers, pay less attention to economic than to political profit. Non-Communist publishers also have their select audiences, such as the membership of the Association of Icelandic Cooperatives, and often operate library clubs, which furnish new books through subscriptions.

There is little doubt that Icelanders, both because of the nationalistic attitude prevailing in the country and because of the generally limited knowledge of foreign languages, prefer to read books translated into Icelandic rather than to read them in the original language.

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THE ICELANDIC BOOK PUBLISHING BUSINESS

Printing and publication of books in Iceland is a time honored profession. However, although the first Icelandic printed book, Brevarium Nidarosiense, was issued in 1530 by the Holar Press, the press was not used much until after about 1850, some time after the Reformation in Iceland.

There was only one press in Iceland until the middle of the 19th century and its use was tightly controlled by the authorities, usually the chief justice of Iceland under whose authority the press was placed.

The press was used almost exclusively for the printing of Icelandic books, such as sagas, with limited editions, until the end of the 18th century. At that time Magnus Stephensen became chief justice of Iceland and obtained control of the press, then located at Videy. He had contempt for the inherited popular culture of the Icelandic people, calling it "A warming up of old porridge." Stephensen introduced a new policy in publishing, to acquaint the people of Iceland with foreign literature and intellectual currents.

By the turn of the present century commercial publishing houses and printing presses had been established. The publishers still devoted most of their time to the Icelandic literature and very little to publishing foreign writings and translations. This lack of interest in foreign literature was deplored by Professor Sigurdur Nordal during the 1920's, who in a series of articles urged measures to supply the Icelandic people with translations of important works from the world's literature.

Since the time of Professor Nordal's appeal, the number of publishing houses, printing presses and book issues has greatly increased. According to 1953 figures there are, besides the state institutions, about 25 publishing houses in Iceland (listed in Appendix I), about an equal number of printing presses and some 62 bookstores. 1/

In a country of about 150,000 inhabitants these numbers are significant; they may be broken down to a publishing house for each 6,000 inhabitants and a bookstore for each 2,500. In view of these figures, the book production and selling trades hardly can be expected to be lucrative, and competition among the various publishers is keen. In 1951 it cost the publishers about 60,000 kronur to produce an average size novel, which would retail for about 30 - 35 Kr. per copy. To cover production cost the publisher would have had to sell 1,800 - 2,000 copies. 2/

Many publishing firms maintain bookstores for distribution of their books. This is true, for example, for the Communist publishing firm Mal og Menning and for Isafoldarprentsmidja, the largest publishing and printing enterprise in the country. 3/

The English Bookshop translates, publishes and sells English language books. Some publishing firms operate literary clubs, the members of which receive new books on a subscription

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basis, and some books are printed in literary magazines in installments.

In 1952 about 140 new books and translations were published in Iceland, somewhat less than the number published in the preceding year. The drop was due mostly to a three-week strike in the printing industry just before Christmas 1952, the best time for selling. 4/

The last complete breakdown of figures available for the Iceland publishing business was issued for 1948. It shows that during 1948 a total of 595 new books was produced (statistics in Appendix II). Of this number, 379 books were originals and 184 were new translations. The categories of social sciences and literature comprised the greatest percentage of works published; 99 books, or 17 per cent, of the total book production were on social science subjects, and 268 books, or 45 per cent, were books of literature. 5/

Books dealing with the applied sciences, geography and history formed the next largest categories.

The greatest number of translations was in the field of literature, 148 of the total of 184 translations for the year. Under the general heading of literature, foreign works of fiction and juvenile books comprised about 90 per cent of the total number of books translated.

Very little information is available on the number of copies printed, although it is known that 4,000 copies of one 1952 best seller were bought from book stores within one week. 6/

While no specific information is available on the criteria used in selecting foreign language books for translation into Icelandic, some general points may be made. Icelandic publishers undoubtedly are guided by the profit motive in most instances. Competition among publishers, even to stay solvent, must be keen in view of the limited Icelandic market, and the tastes of the public doubtless play a major role.

The Communist publishers may be less guided by public tastes than the non-Communist publishers; in the members of the Communist Party and fellow travelers, Communist publishers have a captive audience on whom they can count for support in their selling ventures. For example, in 1953 a Communist publishing firm enlisted the aid of the Reykjavik Communist youth organization to sell a translation of Engels' Origin of the Family. Reportedly this effort netted the publisher 7,000 Kr., from which the youth organization received 10 Kr. per copy sold. 7/

The non-Communist publishers probably are more dependent on the likes of the reading public. However, they also have their select audiences; for instance, the Association of Icelandic Cooperatives published 25 books in 1951, through its publishing house Nordri, for distribution among the cooperative membership.

It is known that of 100 translations of works of fiction in 1948 the overwhelming majority were translations of American or English books. 8/

Available statistics concerning imports of printed matter into Iceland are not reduced to single item categories. However, in 1950 Iceland imported 41.3 metric tons of printed matter, with a value assessed at 931,000 Kr. Of this total, 19.3 metric tons, worth 589,000 Kr., were labelled "Books and Brochures." 9/

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Denmark, Great Britain and the US provided about 90 per cent of the import measured by weight, with Denmark providing about 28 metric tons. During this same period the USSR exported about 184 kg. (somewhat less than one fifth of a metric ton) of books and periodicals to Iceland. 10/

Distribution of foreign-language books in the original would be unlikely to reach the majority of Icelanders. However, the relatively small number of persons with higher level education read foreign-language books in the original extensively, especially French, German, Danish and English books.

Study of foreign languages long has been part of the higher Icelandic school curriculum, but, nevertheless, the number of people well acquainted with the written foreign languages is small. The study of English has become more popular since the end of World War II, but the number of people with any real facility in use of English is still limited. Danish was at one time widely spoken and read and many of the older generation still are able to read and speak it. But relatively few of the younger generation have had reason to learn Danish, and more and more it is spoken only by the better educated circles.

Aside from these limitations on the use of foreign language books for general consumption in Iceland, the strongly nationalistic atmosphere permeating all sections of society would make extensive importation of them at best a highly speculative venture.

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APPENDIX I:

LIST OF ICELANDIC PUBLISHERS 11/

(Known publishers in 1953.)

PUBLISHERS ASSOCIATION.

Boksalafelag Islands

Chairman: Gunnar Einarsson.

Manager of Publishing Division: Ragnar Jonsson.

Manager of Book Sales Division: Bjoern Petursson.

ICELANDIC PUBLISHERS

Arnarutgafan, Ltd.,

Laugaveg 39
Reykjavik (Same address as Bokautgafan Ruginn)

Bokabud Aeskunnar

Reykjavik

Bokfellsutgafan h.f.

Reykjavik

Founded in 1943.

Does not specialize.

Chairman (1951): Magnus Kjaran.

Manager (1951): Berger Kjaran

Bokaforlag Thorsteins M. Jonassonar

Akureyri

Director: Thorsteins M. Jonsson.

Bokautgafa Ithrottasambands Islands

Reykjavik

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Bokautgafa Menningarsjops og Thjodvinafelagsins

Reykjavik

Founded in 1940.

Publishes cultural fund and patriotic society editions.

Director: Jon Emil Gudjonsson.

Bokautgafan Gardarsholmi

Reykjavik

Bokautgafan Heimdallur

Bokautgafan Nordri

PO Box 101

Reykjavik

The publishing agency of the Association of Icelandic cooperatives.

Founded in 1925.

Publishes novels, historical, educational and music works as well as a monthly periodical Meima er Bezt.
Published 25 books in 1951.

Bokautgafan Ruginn

Laugaveg 39
Reykjavik (Same address as Arnarutgafan, Ltd.)

Bokautgafan Run

Hvanneeyrarbraut
Siglufjordur

Bokaverzlum Finnur Einarsson

Publishes books of a general nature.

Director: F. Einarsson.

Bokaverzlum Gudmundar Gamalielssonar

Laekjargoetu 6A
Reykjavik

Founded in 1903.

Director: Gudmundar Gamalielsson.

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Bokaverzlum Sigfusar Eymundssonar

Austurstraeti 18
Reykjavik

Founded in 1872.

Publishes educational and general works.

Director (1953): Bjoern Petersson.

Helgafell Bokutgafa

Gardastraeti 17
Reykjavik

Director (1951): Ragnar Jonsson.

Hid Islenzka Bokmenntafelag

Semi-official publishing house.

President (1951): Matthias Thordarsson.

Hid Islenzka Fornritafelag

Semi-official association which publishes its own materials.

Founded in 1928.

President (1951): J. Asbjornsson.

Secretary (1951): Professor Matthias Thordarsson.

Hladbud

Laugaveg 8
Reykjavik

Founded in 1944.

Publishes books of general nature.

Idunnarutgafan

Published works of general nature in 1951.

Isafoldarprentsmidja h.f.

Thingholtsstraeti 5
Reykjavik

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The largest commercial printing and publishing company in Iceland.

Founded in 1877.

Varied activities: publishes, prints and binds books and sells books and stationary. Reportedly working with a capital of 22,000 Kr. in 1953.

Director (1951): Gunnar Einarsson, a backer of Vardberg, the ultra conservative nationalist newspaper, organ of the Republican Party. May be the same Gunnar Einarsson who is chairman of the Publishers Association.

Bokaverzlum Sigurdur Kristjanssonar

Bankastraeti 3
Reykjavik

Founded in 1883.

Publishes dictionaries and Icelandic sagas.

Draupnisutgafan

Reykjavik

Publishes books of general nature.

The English Bookshop

(Snaebjoern Jonsson and Co.)

Founded in 1927.

Publishes and translates books from English to Icelandic.

Gudjon O. Gudjonsson

Hallveigarstig 6A
Reykjavik

Publishes books of a general nature.

Heimskringla h.f.

Reykjavik

Apparently a sister firm to two other Communist publishing firms, Mal og Menning and Reykholt h.f.

Probably established to distribute the profits of the Communist publishing business to avoid a high rate of taxation, and possibly also to provide a front for eventual use in publishing crypto-Communist propaganda.

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Formerly published leftist and pro-Russian literature.

In early 1953 began to maintain an ostensibly neutral tone. 12/

Maintains its own printing establishments.

Director (1951): Kristinn E. Andresson, a well known Communist, who at the same time was also serving as director of Mal og Menning.

Leiftur h.f.

PO Box 732
Reykjavik

Lithoprent

Noennugoetu 16
Reykjavik

Mal og Menning

Reykjavik

Communist controlled.

Manager (1951): Kristinn E. Andresson, who at the same time also managed the sister firm (or subsidiary) Heimskringla. Reykholt h.f. is another sister firm.

Utilizes the Communist controlled printing firm of Holaprent, also known as Holar h.f., to print its books and periodicals.

Holaprent is located at Thingholtsstraeti 27, in the same building as the Icelandic-USSR Cultural Society, Menningarkegsl Islands og Radstjornarvikjanna (MIR).

Menningar og Fraedslusamband Althydu

Director: Bragi Brynjolfsson

Neistar

(Not listed in the Commercial and Industrial Directory for Iceland for 1953)

Controlled by the Communist Party. 13/

In a selling venture, the Reykjavik CP youth organization sold an undetermined number of copies of Engels' Origin of the Family for approximately 7,000 Kr. The youth organization received 10.00 Kr. per copy sold. 14/

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Njardarutgafan

Holtsgoetu 10
Reykjavik

Prentsmidja Austurlands h.f.

Reykjavik

Reykholt h.f.

Established as a sister firm to the Communist controlled
Mal og Menning and Heimskringla h.f.

It was reported in early 1953 that Reykholt had not produced any publications in a long time (and was not listed in any available official or semi-official directory during the period 1951-1953). The firm was probably set up as a dummy company to avoid payment of high taxes by its relatively successful sister company, Mal og Menning. It is also thought that Reykholt may possibly provide a front for eventual crypto-Communist propaganda activity. 15/

Reykholt is set up as a stock company and was reported in 1953 to have 34 stockholders. Of these, 33 were reportedly Communists, among whom were: Birger Thoroddsen, a second mate in the Icelandic Merchant Marine, and Eymundar Magnusson, Icelandic Merchant Marine captain (was scheduled to retire in 1953) and Communist Party member who has a 2,000 Kr. share in the firm. 16/

Rikisutgafa Namsboka

Hverfisgoetu 21
Reykjavik

The state publishers for school text books.

Sagas s.f.

Reykjavik

Sigurjon Jonsson

Thorsgoetu 4
Reykjavik

Snaelandsutgafan

Reykjavik

Soeutgafan

Reykjavik

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Steindorsprent h.f.

Reykjavik

Axel Thorsteinsson

Raudararstig 46
Reykjavik

Ulfloetur Bokautgafa

Reykjavik

Vikingsutgafan

Gardastraeti 15-17
Reykjavik

Director (1951): Ragnar Jonsson.

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APPENDIX II:

ICELAND BOOK PRODUCTION STATISTICS, 1948 17/

Statistics of book production have been prepared by the National Library at Reykjavik since 1929.

The statistics refer to books only, a book being considered as a work containing more than 16 pages.

The table for 1948 lists in column 2 the total production, which consists of originals and new translations, listed in columns 4 and 5. The figures are given in numbers of titles of new books.

Subject of publication	1948				Average 1937-38	
	Total Production	% of Grand Total	Originals	New Translations	Total Production	%
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
GRAND TOTAL -----	595*	100	379	184	263	100
GENERALITIES -----	11	2	11	-	3	1
Bibliography, librarianship.....	4		4	-		
General works, encyclopedias.....	7		7			
PHILOSOPHY -----	12	2	9	3	3	1
Philosophy.....	12		9	3		
Psychology.....	-		-	-		
RELIGION-----	27	4	23	1	8	3
Religion.....	27		23	1		

* Thirty-two re-editions are included in the total but are not listed in the table. Excluded from the table were 51 reprints.

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ICELAND-BOOK PRODUCTION (cont'd)

	2	3	4	5	6	7
SOCIAL SCIENCES -----	99	17	92	5	84	32
Sociology.....	50		46	2		
Economics.....	20		17	3		
Law	6		6	-		
Education.....	23		23	-		
PHILOLOGY-----	5	1	5	-	6	2
Philology, dictionaries...	5		5	-		
PURE SCIENCE-----	19	3	18	-	12	5
Pure science.....	19		18	-		
APPLIED SCIENCES-----	42	7	35	6	29	11
Medicine.....	8		6	2		
Technology.....	3		3	-		
Agriculture.....	16		16	-		
Domestic economy.....	5		2	2		
Business, communications..	10		8	2		
ARTS-----	19	3	17	2	8	3
Town planning, architecture	-		-	-		
Visual arts.....	2		2	-		
Music.....	3		3	-		
Games, recreations.....	14		12	2		
LITERATURE-----	268	45	102	148	77	29
Essays, belles-letters....	17		15	2		
Poetry, drama.....	29		23	2		
Fiction.....	135	-	29	100		
Juvenile.....	87	-	35	44		
GEOGRAPHY, HISTORY-----	93	16	67	19	33	13
Geography.....	23		16	7		
Biography.....	33		21	11		
History.....	37		30	1		

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